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ABSTRACT

The achievement of excellence in communication is a function of both exposure to the best theory, research, and practice in communication, and the student's level of motivation to learn about communication. A major obstacle to managing conflict and interpersonal relationships successfully in general is the tendency people have to attribute careful, rational planning to the actions of others when, in fact, much behavior is simply careless and thoughtless. An understanding of how people develop an exaggerated sense of their own communication proficiency may help to distinguish between careless behavior and behavior designed to cause problems. Instructors should be concerned with developing and sharing the best possible understanding of the communication process with their students. Careful examination of the factors which lead to a distorted sense of communication proficiency is essential to nurturing students' ability to engage in an on-going reflective analysis of their behavior. Such an ability is a necessary part of any attempt to achieve excellence in communication. (PRA)

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Obstacles to Excellence: Factors Leading to an Exaggerated Sense of Communication Proficiency

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Abstract

The achievment of excellence in communication is a function of both exposure to the best theory, research, and practice in communication, and the student's level of motivation to learn about communication. A brief analysis of the factors which affect student motivation is presented, and one of these factors, the student's assessment of his/her existing level of communication proficiency, is examined in greater detail. A systematic approach to motivating students to strive for a higher degree of excellence in communication by challenging their perceptions of their existing level of proficiency is presented.

There is a tendency to assume that the task of enabling students to achieve excellence in communication depends primarily upon discovering and presenting the best, most theoretically sound concepts, principles, and exercises in a well -organized and relevant fashion. While it is undoubtedly true that the quality of the theoretical framework which underpins instruction has a direct impact on the qualitative improvements in communication which can be achieved, the student's level of motivation to learn about communication also plays a critical role. While most teachers recognize the importance of a student's level of motivation in determining how much and how well s/he learns, more attention should be given to alternative and possibly better ways of motivating students to learn about communication.

For many communication professionals trained in the sixties and seventies, the idea that students may need to be more motivated to learn about communication may seem a bit strange. The political, social, and cultural upheavals of those times made communication problems very real and immediate to people. There was a more conscious recognition of both the importance of communicating well and of the potential problems which could arise from poor communication. This is not to say that people then were perfectly motivated to learn about communication, simply that students approached communication with a somewhat clearer sense of how important it was.

As we all know, times have changed. College freshmen of today were only 8 years old in 1980 when Ronald Reagan became president. While it is always a bit of an oversimplification to generalize about a particular period in history, it seems very clear that the eighties highlighted a different set of values and behaviors than did the previous decades. The eighties, during which current college students matured and formed attitudes about society, work, and other people, was an era in which the gratification of personal goals and needs was stressed over one's ability to participate

in mutually defined and socially beneficial relationships. It was also an era that emphasized material rather than psychological satisfaction. These changes lead people to de-value communication.

This has produced a different kind of college student in our classrooms of the nineties. Their attitudes and assumptions about communication are relatively simplistic in comparison to those who preceded them. If they are to achieve excellence as communicators, those who are responsible for their instruction need to be aware of these differences and to identify some specific ways of increasing the student's interest. The balance of this paper will consist of a brief overview of some of the issues relevant to student motivation, and a somewhat more detailed treatment of a particular approach that may be useful.

Three key components seem to shape a students motivation to learn about communication. These are: 1) their perception of the relative importance of communication in their lives, 2) the relative sophistication of their understanding of what communication involves, including how simple or complex they think it is, and especially what it means to be a "good" communicator, and 3) their assessment of their own current level of communication proficiency. Those who accurately perceive the importance of communication in their lives, recognize that communication is a complex process requiring sophisticated abilities, and who are thoughtful and careful in the evaluation of their own communication competency are more likely to learn and utilize valuable communication abilities. Conversely, those who underestimate the importance of communication, have an oversimplistic view of what communication involves, and who carelessly evaluate their own level of competency not only will learn less, they will lack the motivation to make an effort to apply what they may have learned.

Many texts attempt to challenge one or both of the first two sets of assumptions. It is relatively common to find discussions of the importance of

communication and/or the value of communication competency (DeVito, 1988, Rosenfeld & Berko, 1990, Weaver, 1990), and of what are often called "common sense myths" about communication (Fisher, 1987) in introductory texts. There is no one perfect technique for dealing with such issues, and each author tends to approach these issues within the overall goals of the particular text. In most cases, however, such discussions are relatively brief, and they could probably benefit from a somewhat more detailed elaboration.

What is not specifically addressed in most texts, however, is the issue of the student's perception of his/her own level of communication proficiency. It is this author's view that even people who think that communication is important and complex may still lack adequate motivation due to an exaggerated sense of their own level of communication proficiency. There are a number of factors which naturally lead people to see themselves as better communicators than they really are, unless they have thought very carefully about both their own behavior and the criteria that such behavior should be judged by. The effect of this tendency is to diminish their motivation to work to be better communicators.

This condition is especially tragic since this is not the result of a conscious, informed decision. People don't choose to be poor communicators, or to be satisfied with a minimal level of communication proficiency. They simply fail to realize how their casual, informal, and unsystematic assessments of their own communicative behavior can be misleading and harmful. Those who don't carefully analyze their communicative behavior usually haven't thought too much about how or why such a systematic analysis could be worthwhile. If people truly comprehended the importance and complexity of communication, and if they better understood how they tend to overestimate the quality of their own behavior, they would be more motivated to learn about communication. In the absence of such understandings they will lack the motivation to exert the effort necessary to improve how they

communicate.

The balance of this paper presents a systematic approach to the problem of student perceptions of their own level of communication proficiency. It is designed to prompt them to critically examine basic assumptions which they have made which affect both how well they communicate and their level of motivation to learn to communicate at a higher level of quality. The underlying premise is that by challenging their taken-for-granted assessments of their communicative behavior, and by illustrating how difficult it is to know if one's communication abilities are adequate, the student will be more willing to seriously consider suggestions designed to help him/her communicate better.

The discussion that follows is written in such a way as to address the student directly.

Factors Which Distort the Assessment of Our Communication Proficiency

Why We Think That We're Better Communicators Than We Really Are.

There are a number of factors that distort our understanding of the communication process and that give us an unrealistic view of our own level of communication proficiency. This distorted sense of our own ability keeps us from exerting the effort necessary to really improve by leading us to assume that, while we may not be perfect, our present communication abilities are adequate for our needs both now and in the future. There may be skills that we might like to develop, but they aren't too complicated and they don't require a significant commitment. The main reason why people are not as skillful as they could be, the real source of much miscommunication and unnecessary interpersonal conflict, is this tendency to assume that my "natural" way of communicating is adequate for all my needs. In

essence, we don't communicate as well as we might, we don't work to improve our abilities, because we ASSUME that we already communicate as well as we need to.

When we ponder suggestions as to how we might communicate more effectively we weigh the effort required to implement them against the potential payoff. Unless we have very carefully assessed all of the costs of our current deficiencies in comparison to the benefits of other alternatives, we are likely to fall short of the commitment that is necessary. We won't work to improve if we're not motivated to improve. Conversely, people who work diligently to improve their communication abilities do so not because they love to work hard but because they have more carefully analyzed the situation and they have more clearly identified the tangible benefits that will be derived. There is a terrible and inescapable irony in the fact that people persist in bad habits that could be changed because they aren't willing to exert the effort to discover just how other alternatives could be more beneficial.

Everybody wants to be an effective communicator in the abstract. Most of us are intelligent, honest, well-intentioned people who would like to live and work to the best of our ability. The problem is that many of us have made some careless assumptions about our communication behavior which lead us to think that we're better communicators than we really are. What follows is a list of factors which lead us to make such assumptions, thereby making it more difficult for us to learn and improve. Think about them. Aren't we all subject to these distorting influences? If one thinks seriously about these factors, it's easy to see how we are all susceptible to them. If one can see how these factors distort one's thinking about his/her behavior, s/he will immediately become more motivated to learn about and improve her/his communication behavior. In essence, those who don't see the need to enhance their communication skills are those who are blind to the effects of these factors.

1) We are not exposed to all possible communication behaviors/styles.

Our communication style is not the result of a systematic analysis of the communication process. We pick up many important communication patterns from those we observe while we are young, before we have the ability to critically evaluate what we're learning. However wonderful our parents or peers are, they also picked up their communication style from their parents and peers, not from a textbook. What is passed on from generation to generation could only be adequate if it were perfect. It would be absurd to suggest that learning how to communicate in the style of our parents or peers is all that we need to know about communication. Technology, work, and society in general have changed, and these changes will not only continue, they will accelerate.

It is true that we have other sources from which to learn about communication. The problem is, we do not make equal and full use of all these sources. At a very early age parents, teachers, peers and others help us to become selective about the information we consume. It's simply false to believe that socialization is a comprehensive process in which all possible behaviors and attitudes are examined. No one learns all the possibilities within his/her culture, let alone what might be possible and useful from other cultures. This would not be so bad if at least we were more conscious of these limitations, but part of the effect of socialization is to convince us that our choices/characteristics are the only natural and logical conclusions to be reached. Anthropologists have clearly identified this paradox: the culture into which we are socialized is a relatively arbitrary human construction which its members take to be natural, the only acceptable way to be a human being.

In a sense, socialization is a form of programming. Without it one could not function, but it also works to control and shape the individual in ways that s/he may not fully comprehend. How's this for a paradox: in order to think about and evaluate a

way of communicating, one has to have already learned a system of communication. When we finally do begin to think about our "personality" we can only think about it based on the same information which helped to shape it. This doesn't mean we can't change, but it does mean that each of us is likely to take too many things for granted, to not question aspects of our identity that in fact need examination. For me to assume that I am clearly aware of the areas within my identity which need improvement is both incorrect and dangerous. We all know people who turned out just like the parents that they said they would never imitate.

The bottom line here is the simple fact if we assume our upbringing gave us all the skills we need, we had better hope our parents were ahead of their time, perfect, and that we learned perfectly from them. If this was not the case, much of what we have learned may in fact interfere with becoming a better communicator. It's also important to recognize that inadequacies in how we communicate stem both from lacking information/skill and from utilizing information/behaviors that are incorrect. A colleague of mine was fond of saying that: "It's not what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what you know that just ain't so."

2) We do not consciously select our own personality/communication style.

From the preceding discussion, another important implication can be derived, and that is the fact that our identity is not something we select as one complete, well-integrated package. Our identity, that which gives shape and meaning to our existence, is something that emerges gradually out of thousands of experiences. It's not something you choose, like an article of clothing or a book. We never discussed with a salesperson the long term costs and benefits of this identity versus that identity. It certainly is the case that our choices and actions enable us to shape our identity, but our identity is not something we fully control and can manipulate at will.

Another paradox looms. We all like to think of ourselves as being "free" to do what we want, but am I really free when much of my identity has been shaped by others without my full and informed consent? Do I really think that I can easily control or manipulate my identity at will? If I think I can, I am, in fact, a deluded victims of that identity. To the extent that I see how my identity is shaped by others, and how my perceptions and experiences are structured by this imperfect identity, I am less likely to be constrained by those limits. How's that again? It's really very simple if one thinks about it. If I think I'm freer than I really am, I will fail to perceive the limiting factors and I will be more misled and controlled by them. If I recognize the limiting factors, I can take them into account and begin to deal with them.

I can never be completely "free" but I can have more control over my own behavior. More freedom of behavior, in essence, emerges as a possibility out of the recognition of how our behavioral options have been limited. In fact, the perspective taken in this text is that self-determination is a function of our communication abilities. It is a skill that can be developed, and not a given quality that we all possess equally. As we think and act more thoughtfully, we may transcend previous limitations and expand our range of options.

The central issue is reflected in the following questions: How do I know if who I am is who I should/could be? If I'm currently satisfied with my communication behaviors, how do I know I should be? Isn't it possible that how I've been programmed has blinded me to some important defects or concealed from me some valuable potential skills? One of the tragedies of human existence is that millions of people live their lives at less than full potential, not because they're lazy or stupid, but because they have not been adequately prepared to ask some basic questions about their identity. The true value of enhanced communication skills lies in the fact that they can make our whole life more meaningful and rewarding. Becoming a more

skillful communicator is one of the few ways in which we can actually begin to exert some degree of control over who we are and who we want to be.

It's human nature to assume that our difficulties, problems, failures, etc. are caused by others. To really begin to remedy these problems, however, the skillful communicator looks first to his/her own actions. What can I do differently? We can't change our behavior as simply as we change our clothes, but as we make small changes in how we communicate, we begin to gain more control over our lives and identities. We can't change who our parents were, we can't change our prior education and socialization, but we can decide, if we think about it carefully, to communicate with others a little differently. As the old Chinese proverb states: a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. The problem for many people is that changing seems either unimportant or so overwhelmingly complex, that they fail to take those first steps. This text will identify what those steps might be for those willing to consider the journey. Do we really have any choice?

3) Objective and systematic analysis of our own communication behavior is rare.

Each of us has engaged at one time or another in some kind of analysis of how we communicate. Specific skills such as writing are frequently subjected to evaluation by ourself and others during education and employment. We tend to feel that we're in a good position to judge our communication skills based on the outcomes of our interactions. If we are able to express what we mean, get what we want, etc., we feel satisfied. We know what we wanted and we can tell whether or not we got it. It's important to note, however, that such evaluations are not necessarily comprehensive nor objective. We don't necessarily know how or why it worked or failed, or what we could have done to be even more successful. We don't always analyze all of the components underlying our messages, including other alternative messages that might have been more effective.

"Common sense" tells us that we carefully scrutinize each of the messages we send and that we objectively evaluate the outcomes to see how we could have done better. Most of the time, however, any evaluation is casual and haphazard, and casual evaluations tend to be self-serving. The reality is that we tend to assume that we've been successful until it's proven otherwise.

In addition, there are no simple, objective standards by which to judge the more complex and often more important communication behaviors. For example, how does one objectively determine whether or not one has listened carefully enough to another person in an emotional situation? One might suggest that if the receiver could repeat the message that was sent, then s/he listened adequately. The problem is that there is frequently more to the message than just the words. The speaker may have been seeking more than just an understanding of what was <u>said</u>. S/he may have been trying to get the receiver to understand him/herself, how s/he feels, why s/he acts in a particular way. How do we know we've truly understood at this level?

Isn't it possible that one of the reasons why people get into hassles with each other is that it's much easier to say "you just don't understand me" than it is to think critically about whether or not I really made myself as clear as I could have? How committed am I to <u>helping</u> the other person understand me? My effort as a communicator reflects my values and motivations. Values can be analyzed, but not objectively. It is precisely this kind of complexity that leads people to avoid asking more basic questions about how they communicate. It's easier to criticize someone else's behavior than it is to scrutinize our own behavior and the values underlying it. If we do not engage in such a systematic analysis, however, how can we be certain as to the accuracy of our perception of our own level of communication competency?

In addition, without such an evaluation, how could one determine how s/he might have done better, what the other communication possibilities might have been? There's a big difference between knowing <u>that</u> we were successful and

understanding how or why we were successful. It's comforting to know that we've succeeded, but it's more valuable over the long term to know why.

4) It's always easy to blame the other for communication failures.

Any act of communication involves at least two people. Whatever happens in a communication situation is a function of the behaviors of each of the participants. In essence, we share a mutual responsibility for the outcome of our communication encounters. In practice, however, this mutuality provides us with a ready excuse for any failure: if it didn't work it's your fault, not mine. Any sender can always blame the receiver for a communication failure, and vice versa. "You didn't listen carefully!" "Your message wasn't clear!" This gives each of the participants a good excuse to not bother thinking too much about whatever errors s/he might have made. We tend to focus our critical scrutiny first and foremost on the other's actions.

It's common sense to say that people learn from their mistakes. The problem is, however, that if I can always blame the other for the failure, I may not feel as if I have made a mistake from which I could learn. I may have many communication deficiencies that I am not aware of since I see the problems as being caused by the other person's behaviors. Many teachers and students, for example, fail to perform to their potential because they perceive only the deficiencies in the other and not in him/her self. "I could try some different approaches in the class but the students don't care, so why bother." Maybe they don't care because the current approach is so bad. "I don't even bother to take notes because his lectures are so unclear." Might it help to read the book before coming to class?

Now this is asking a lot. Giving up our habit of blaming others is hard to do. Many times it might actually be the other's fault. The point is not so much that we should never blame anyone for anything. It's more the case that we should do so only with great care, after we've thoughtfully scrutinized our own role. Why? Just

because we should be "nice" to each other? On the contrary, it is in our own self-interest to try to discover how we could communicate more effectively so that we can better achieve our goals. When I am willing to take responsibility for critically scrutinizing my own choices and behaviors I am doing something that will ultimately benefit me. We can reap such benefits, however, only if we work to avoid the natural tendency to shift blame to the other. Becoming more willing to carefully evaluate our own behavior is an essential component in the process of personal development.

At the other end of the spectrum, those of us who tend to blame ourselves for every problem must avoid such self-destructive and negative attitudes about our own behavior. Evaluations of our own behavior should focus on getting it right the next time and not on continuing to feel bad about mistakes of the past. If one feels that s/he has failed, the first opportunity to do something right is to have the correct attitude about the failure. The only good it does anyone to think about past errors is to enable future behaviors to be more positive.

5) We seek out others who confirm us as we already are.

One of the ways in which we assess our own communication behavior is to look at how well we are able to deal with those around us. This can be helpful, especially if we encounter a wide-range of people. An important limitation here, however, is that frequently we think about only those with whom we are already close, and that could be misleading. People tend to associate with people who are similar to themselves. In addition, we like people who like us. How many of us seek relationships with people with whom we have problems communicating? If our friends find our communication behavior to be adequate, does that mean our communication abilities in general are adequate? If my friend laughs at my jokes does it mean that I'm good at telling jokes or that my friend finds the same things amusing?

Our recurrent interactions with self-selected samples of friends and acquaintances lead us to be more comfortable and more satisfied with our communication behaviors than we should be. The problem is that we use these friendly and comfortable situations to assess much of our communication behavior, yet the real challenges to our communication skills frequently arise in interactions with people we may not know or like very much at all. College students, for example, are strongly influenced in the development of their skills and attitudes by their fellow students, but those friends are usually long gone after graduation when they have to be evaluated by others when embarking upon a career.

The basic point is that using the reactions of our friends and family as a way of assessing our communication skill inherently distorts our perception of how competent we are, and it can actually handicap us as we interact in the future with much more diverse and unfamiliar audiences.

6) We tend to trivialize our communication tasks.

When thinking about communication we frequently think in terms of the relatively straightforward process of giving and receiving simple information. "What time is it?" "Please pass the salt." What's so complicated about communication? The fact of the matter is that sometimes communication is so simple and easy that we don't even have to think about what we're doing.

The problem is that other times communication is incredibly complex. Being able to make small talk may be easy, but persuading others, dealing with conflict, and building healthy relationships can present major challenges. As the topic becomes more complex, the stakes get higher, and the audience less familiar and possibly hostile, our task becomes more complex and difficult. It is vital that the reader focuses on the more complex and demanding instances of communication when assessing his/her communication skills.

7) We tend to underestimate the cost of ineffectiveness.

One of the most dangerous tendencies we all fall victim to involves the assumption that, if our message doesn't succeed, we can always just send another. While this is sometimes true, in many important situations failure in the first attempt may mean complete failure. We can't afford to be casual about our efforts if we may not get a second chance. A politician communicates, but if s/he isn't effective s/he loses the election. A salesperson communicates, but if the messages aren't carefully designed, no sale is made. Not just less of a sale, no sale at all. If one carefully considers the potential costs of failure, it should be clear that any assumptions to the effect that "I communicate fine just as I am" can have disastrous consequences for the naive and careless person.

8) We assess our communication needs based on past experiences.

Let's assume for a moment that one feels that his/her existing communication skills are adequate to meet his/her current needs in living and working with people. Two important questions deserve attention. How does one know that these skills will be adequate in the future? How does one know what additional skills may be needed? Unless one can be certain that s/he will be living and working in the same situation that s/he finds him/herself in now, one can't assume that his/her current level or types of communication skills will be good enough to meet future needs.

This is an especially important issue for college students who are in a period of transition in their lives. They seek preparation for a future career that will change their identity, where they live, and with whom they work and associate. They will be separated, to some extent, from the friends, acquaintances, and family that are so supportive. Will their supervisor, peers, and clients be as supportive? Will they laugh at the jokes, find the descriptions adequate, be influenced as easily? A major impediment to being as successful as they might be is the tendency to assume that

how they communicate today will be adequate for their future needs, since one cannot know for certain what his/her future communication needs will be!

It would be absurd for pre-med students to assume that they already knew everything that they needed to know as doctors before completing their education. Students frequently assume, however, that they already know everything important about communication as freshmen. Why is that? In large part it is due to the fact that we've all been communicating since birth, while few of us have the opportunity to practice medicine without a degree. Communication is such an integral and pervasive part of our lives that we naturally assume that all of the needed skills are "built-in" or easily accessible when needed. But in fact this is not the case. We all communicate, but that's not saying much. The real issues are, how well am I able to communicate, both now and in the future, and how much better could my life be if I communicated at a higher level of quality? Even though we've been communicating for years, we all can reap real benefits from working to improve skills that have such general value and relevance.

We live in a society in which jobs, organizations, technologies, and relationships are changing more and more rapidly every day. Neglecting the opportunity to develop our communication abilities today may cost us dearly later. The tragedy is that many students waste these precious opportunities due to a failure to think more clearly about themselves, their communication skills, and the demands of the Information Age. Such carelessness involves risking all that they might someday hope to accomplish. A willingness to think about some of the assumptions we casually make about our communication behavior is a critical step towards improving our communication behavior and, more importantly, to gaining greater control over our lives in general. Accepting the challenge to think about and work to develop our communication abilities automatically engages us in a process that will ultimately make us happier, better people more in control of our own lives.

The sad fact is that naive, simplistic, and inaccurate assumptions about our communication abilities keep us from developing the motivation and understanding necessary to get the most out of our communication and interaction with others. Even worse, it's often the case that those who could benefit the most from improved communication skills are those who are the least concerned with how they communicate. The first step out of this condition involves thinking more carefully about our current level of communication proficiency and what we might be able to accomplish by striving for a higher level of communication ability. While it is difficult to change our communication behavior, if we are motivated to observe, analyze, and integrate useful ideas into our behavior these changes will start to open up opportunities that weren't perceived before, and habitual sources of miscommunication can be more frequently avoided. The key is to recognize the need for improvement.

Conclusion

Mere exposure to these ideas can't guarantee that students will be adequately motivated to learn about communication. There are always limits on one's ability to motivate others. Getting students to think more carefully about these issues, however, must have some positive effect on their perception of the significance of the concepts, principles, and experiences which are available in a communication course. In order to maximize the potential learning experience, students must have some conceptual framework from which to assess the value of course content, especially in the America of the nineties.

It is important that the discussion of how we develop an exaggerated sense of our own level of communication proficiency should not become a negative "put

down" of the "ignorant" student. The discussion should be carefully framed to emphasize how we are all victimized by these assumptions. It can be used to explain how frequently well-intentioned people can make destructive choices about how to communicate.

It is this author's view that a major obstacle to successfully managing conflict and interpersonal relationships in general is the tendency people have to attribute careful, rational planning to the actions of others which in fact are often simply careless and thoughtless behaviors. To the extent that people can begin to understand how little careful planning goes into much of our communicative behavior, they may be better able to see how a constructive approach to interpersonal problems might work. Instead of taking the other's behavior as intended to insult to me, for example, I may consider the possibility that s/he may simply have not thought very much about her/his messages. In essence, many communication problems are the result of carelessness, and an understanding of how we develop an exaggerated sense of our own communication proficiency may help us to distinguish between careless behavior and behavior designed to cause problems.

Finally, while we must be concerned with developing and sharing the best possible understanding of the communication process with our students, developing a critical awareness of their own behavior is equally important if they are to truly learn and implement these understandings. A careful examination of the factors which lead to a distorted sense of communication proficiency is essential to nurturing their ability to engage in an on-going reflective analysis of their behavior. Such an ability is a necessary part of any attempt to achieve excellence in communication.

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